

County Council Operating Budget Testimony

Richard Montgomery Cluster

(Beall ES, College Gardens ES, Ritchie Park ES, Bayard Rustin ES, Twinbrook ES,
Julius West MS, and Richard Montgomery HS)

April 14, 2020

Dear President Katz, Vice-President Hucker, and the Montgomery County Council,

Thank you for the opportunity to present written testimony in addition to accepting prerecorded and remote live testimony. We appreciate your willingness to carry on with governance in these unusual times.

We also recognize that county revenues and demands on county resources have shifted in ways no one could have predicted six months ago. Nonetheless, we are writing today to ask the county to make every effort possible to fund MCPS at the full level recommended by the County Executive.¹

In particular, we would like to point out two characteristics of MCPS spotlighted by the current crisis that underscore the need for this level of operating budget:

1. The inestimable value of MCPS's **human resources**;
2. The **inflexible nature**, as is the case for all institutions, of MCPS's current and future allocations.

First and foremost, as you know, staffing comprises nearly two-thirds of the MCPS operating budget. We believe that the closure of the schools and abrupt shift to distance education has brought into sharp relief the *passion, professionalism, and adaptability* of our teachers, support staff, and administration. The *quality* of our teachers merits competitive salaries, and we need to hire a *quantity* of staff that provides every child at every school with a comprehensive range of services as well as access to a world-class education.

Even in “normal” times, the community expects so much from teachers. Now, they have been asked to adjust to completely different techniques for delivering content and assessing mastery—perhaps especially in the case of elementary teachers who usually depend entirely on building face-to-face relationships with their young charges. Their attempts to learn new technologies have been complicated by the ongoing tasks of making sense of new curricula and figuring out how to present methods of communicating concepts embedded in those curricula. And, different subjects require different approaches to distance education, just as different students have

¹ “Montgomery County Public Schools, Budget Year FY21 Recommended,”
Montgomery County MD Operating Budget, 2020,
<https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Department.aspx?ID=MCPS>.

different learning needs; there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all format.

Yet, MCPS teachers, staff, and administrators have risen to meet these challenges. Here are just a few success stories from the RM cluster:

- As MCPS first moved to make sure that hungry children in the county were fed and thus ready to learn, Twinbrook ES Principal Matt Devan, the Rockville City Council, and other members of the Rockville community advocated for adding Twinbrook to the list of meal distribution sites. Over 200 children are receiving food each day from this site.
- Julius West MS Principal Craig Staton and other administrators sent out daily emails, coordinated Chromebook distribution on an ongoing basis, telephoned and emailed individual students in order to check in with those who were missing, and partnered with the PTSA to hold an April 7 web conference explaining how online learning would work. Over 70 registrants (and likely over 100 parents) participated in the meeting. As JW parents ourselves, we also salute the school's realistic, common-sense approach to online teaching, which includes asynchronous delivery of course materials so that students can work at times that are most beneficial for their families and synchronous availability of teachers for answering questions and addressing social/emotional issues caused by the crisis.
- Bayard Rustin ES has taken steps to continue its Chinese immersion program, such as incorporating Chinese-language study into the mathematics curriculum. Meanwhile, Beall ES is offering daily morning announcements and teacher-led bedtime stories. Nearly every elementary PTA president in our cluster reported that the teachers in their schools have contacted every single student.

While hiccups of varying levels of severity have also occurred, on the whole MCPS employees are going far above and beyond the duties for which they were hired. As we have always known, schools are so important to providing services to disadvantaged populations, with respect to everything from language instruction, to meals, to needed services for individuals with disabilities. These services benefit not only the students in these situations but also the entire community. Funding must continue to flow to the schools to meet these needs. Another way of stating this is that, even though labor comprises a large portion of the operating budget, our human resources prove again and again that they provide incredible value to county taxpayers.

Second, even though the demands on MCPS's system-wide physical plant have been reduced, other forms of unforeseen expenses have arisen. However, it is often not possible to redirect allocated funds to address the needs that have been created in equipping students and staff mentally, physically, technologically, socially, and emotionally for teaching and learning from thousands of different locations. For example:

- MCPS is experiencing funding gaps in the deployment of Chromebooks and mobile hotspots.
- Fuel contracts required prepayment before it was known that most buses would not be running.

- Security staff at Richard Montgomery HS report that school break-ins have increased throughout the county, since far fewer people are regularly on site.
- Administrators are thinking creatively about how to provide year-end celebrations and continue formal policy processes, such as the selection of new principals.

We do anticipate that the upfront costs incurred now will continue to provide benefits in the future. For instance, MCPS will have developed the expertise to deliver content in alternate ways to more students and, possibly, more efficiently. This may open up additional opportunities for magnet course offerings as well as outreach to students with complex health or other conditions.

For these reasons and more, we argue that funding MCPS at the full level recommended by the County Executive is essential to the long-term health of the entire county. Thank you for your time and for listening to our requests. We wish you the best in managing the difficult decisions you face in finalizing the 2021 operating budget.